

“No Known Antidote” Paraquat and its domestic users in Britain

Weed control as a domestic task, is often shared by men and women as a time consuming but necessary part of maintaining a garden in order that it can be enjoyed and admired. As such, a great selection of chemical and mechanical aids have been developed to make this job easier and faster. This paper examines the history of just one of the many weedkilling preparations available on the twentieth century British domestic market, paraquat. The weedkiller was first available to the agricultural industry in 1962, then in a different formulation was introduced to the British domestic gardener in 1965.

Using adverts and articles from newspapers and magazines circulating in the UK, product packaging, in addition to Hansard, I want to show the varied ways that garden weeds and human users were portrayed, addressed, and how unintended uses changed how the chemical was packaged, presented and discussed over the following twenty four years after its introduction. There are questions about how far government can intervene through legislation and enforcement, what responsibility manufacturers should and do take for investigating and communicating hazards associated with their products, as well as what responsibility individuals should and do take for dealing with herbicides safely and appropriately.

This is part of my PhD research entitled Chemicals and their Users in the British Home, 1930 to 1989.